

CHAPTER SEVEN

... but draw not nigh this tree

EVIL IN EARLY ISLAMIC THOUGHT*

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INTRODUCTION

Quote 1: Know that the welfare of everything . . . consists in the mixture of good and evil . . . If evil were unmixed, creation would perish; if good were pure, [our] examination would become pointless.¹

As al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868/869), the “famous Arab prose writer [and] author of works of [belles lettres], Mu‘tazilī theology and politico-religious polemics,”² gives to understand, good and evil possess a crucial function in

* I wish to thank Ziad Bou Akl, Catherine König-Pralong, Ulrich Rudolph, and an anonymous reader for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

1 Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, edited by ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn. 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Jayl, 1996), 1:204.

2 C. Pellat, “Al-Djāḥiẓ,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, edited by B. Lewis, C. Pellat, and J. Schacht, vol. 2. (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 385a–387b, 385a; on the Mu‘tazila, see below, n. 5; on al-Jāḥiẓ, see A. Heinemann, ed., *Al-Jāḥiẓ: A Muslim Humanist for Our Time* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2009).

the setup of the world: among other things, they contribute to its *physical* existence and persistence. Moreover, beyond this ontological function he characterizes them as the driving forces behind what he addresses as “[our] examination,” as though human beings (we) were exposed to some sort of test. What does al-Jāḥiẓ have in mind? More generally speaking, what precisely *is* evil, according to al-Jāḥiẓ and his contemporaries, and what are the various roles it is alleged to play in the world?

In this study I propose to approach these questions and inquire into the most fundamental features of evil according to early Islamic thought.³ My chief interest resides, on the one hand, in the essential doctrinal tenets defended by Islam; and, on the other hand, in the emergence and basic development of what I will call the “orthodox position,” by which I refer to the age of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), one of the most important scholars for the formulation of what was to become the prevalent Sunnite doctrine.⁴ I shall focus on two crucial stages of this development: in order to elucidate the setting of discussions about evil as well as the limits within which early Islamic thinkers could develop it, I shall, in the first section of this chapter, look into Islam’s core reference point and founding document, the Qurʾān, and investigate the notion of evil it purports. In the second section, I will turn to the early theological debates about evil carried out primarily by two competing schools, the Muʿtazila, including the just-quoted al-Jāḥiẓ, and the Ashʿariyya, the sect to which al-Ghazālī belonged.⁵ Chronologically, the Muʿtazila emerged before

3 The emphasis of this study will be on *moral* evil which, from a contemporary viewpoint, seems to be philosophically much more intriguing than physical evil. Regarding the terminology in this paper, usually, “evil” is employed as counterpart to “good,” occasionally, however, the term “bad” will be used instead. Overall, I will apply “evil” and “bad” interchangeably for both moral and physical evil, in harmony with the tradition itself.

4 On al-Ghazālī’s thought in general, see particularly F. Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

5 On these schools see, for example, the entries W. M. Watt, “Ashʿariyya,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, edited by B. Lewis, C. Pellat, and J. Schacht, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 696a–b. “Ashʿariyya”; D. Gimaret, “Muʿtazila,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, edited by B. Lewis, C. Pellat, and J. Schacht, vol. 7 (Leiden, New York: Brill, 1993), 783a–793b.

the Ash‘ariyya but were gradually superseded by the latter, who, as of the eleventh/twelfth century, represented orthodox or mainstream Sunni Islam.

The analysis in the second section of the chapter shall be centered on the *Mustaṣfā*, a key juridical text by the just-mentioned Ash‘arite thinker al-Ghazālī. More precisely, I shall focus on a passage which is particularly interesting for our purposes, as it represents a (fictitious) debate between al-Ghazālī and the Mu‘tazila on evil. While this disagreement is authored from the perspective of one of the parties involved and is, therefore, tendentious, it is nonetheless a unique document. It displays, first, the Mu‘tazilite concept of evil, al-Ghazālī’s chief target, as well as some of the conceptual nuances within this school; second, the fundamental points al-Ghazālī criticizes in his opponents’ teachings; and third, al-Ghazālī’s own position which, after all, contributed considerably to the development of majority Sunni Islam as taught at the schools of higher learning since approximately the twelfth/thirteenth century.⁶ This procedure, or so I hope, will allow us to acquire a sense of the gradual conceptual shifts taking place in the time between the Qur’ānic revelation and the first consolidation of the orthodox position.⁷

6 On the schools of higher learning, still see with benefit G. Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981); in his vein, C. M. Stanton, *Higher Learning in Islam: The Classical Period, AD 700–1300* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990).

7 It may be worth noting that in this paper I will not discuss philosophical positions in the narrow sense of the word, which is to say, with regard to the time period under discussion, Avicenna and his theory of evil. The chief reason for this omission consists in the fact that Avicenna’s concept of evil, despite its sophistication and significance in the post-classical era, did not play a major role in the formation of Sunni orthodoxy. For an analysis of Avicenna’s theory, see S. C. Inati, *The Problem of Evil: Ibn Sīnā’s Theodicy* (Binghamton, NY: Global Publications, ICGS, 2000); with focus not only on Avicenna but also on his most ardent “student” Aquinas, see C. Steel, “Avicenna and Thomas Aquinas on Evil,” in *Avicenna and His Heritage: Acts of the International Colloquium, Leuven—Louvain-la-Neuve September 8–September 11, 1999*, edited by J. Janssens and D. De Smet (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 171–196; with emphasis on physical evil, see C. Belo, *Chance and Determinism in Avicenna and Averroes* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), particularly 38–51.

1. PARADISE LOST: EVIL AND THE QUR'ĀN

Quote 2: And when thy Lord said to the angels, "I am setting in the earth a viceroy." They said, "What, wilt Thou set therein one who will do corruption there, and shed blood, while We proclaim Thy praise and call Thee Holy?" . . . And when [God] said to the angels, "Bow yourselves to Adam"; so they bowed themselves, save Iblis; he refused, and waxed proud, and so he became one of the unbelievers.⁸

As the Qur'ān gives to understand, the history of evil takes its outset already during the process of God's creating the world. It is closely linked with the fate of Iblīs, the fallen angel, the angel who refused to bow himself to any other than God and who, as a result, was dismissed by God and henceforth has haunted humanity as Satan.⁹ It is noteworthy how elsewhere in the Qur'ān Iblīs's (or rather, Satan's) new function is introduced:

Quote 3: Said [God], "What ails thee, Iblis, that thou art not among those bowing?" Said he, "I would never bow myself before a mortal whom Thou hast created of a clay of mud moulded." Said He, "Then go thou forth hence; thou art accursed. Upon thee shall rest the curse, till the Day of Doom." . . . Said he, "My Lord, for Thy

8 Q 2:30–34. Qur'ānic quotes are taken from Arberry's translation throughout. Additions in square brackets are my clarifications. See *The Koran Interpreted*, edited and translated by A. J. Arberry. 2 vols. (London: George Allen and Unwin—New York: Macmillan, 1955).

9 There are several traditions according to which Iblis belonged to a specific angelic tribe, see for example al-Ṭabarī, *The Story of Iblis*, in *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 1: *General Introduction and from the Creation to the Flood*, translated and annotated by F. Rosenthal (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 249–257. For instance at p. 250: "[According to a specific tradition,] Iblis was one of the noblest angels and belonged to the most honored tribe among them"; cf., 255–256, suggesting a distinction between the jinn and the angels: "[According to another tradition,] Iblis was one of the jinn whom the angels drove away. One of the angels captured him and took him to heaven." See also P. J. Awn, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblis in Sufi Psychology* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 24–33; S. Wild, "Der Böse und das Böse im Koran," in *Das Böse in der Sicht des Islam*, edited by K. Berger, H. Herholz, and U. J. Niemann (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2009), 53–66, esp. 57–61.

pervverting me I shall deck all fair to them in the earth, and I shall pervert them, all together, excepting those Thy servants among them that are devoted." Said He, "This is for Me a straight path: over My servants thou shalt have no authority, except those that follow thee, being perverse."¹⁰

Accordingly, with God's explicit consent Satan is permitted to tempt human beings and lead them astray. And precisely this is what happened in paradise for the first time, when Satan successfully persuaded Adam and Eve to eat of the forbidden tree, resulting in their expulsion from paradise.¹¹

This myth has several noteworthy implications for our topic, the first concerning the question of the origin of evil. From the Qur'ānic description of creation it is clear that God did not intentionally bring about evil himself. It occurs only secondarily, as the effect of God obviously having granted Iblīs free will. Nonetheless, God accepts its occurrence; he does not destroy Iblīs, his own creature, in order to rid creation again of evil. Instead, he makes an agreement with him and thus integrates evil in a specific manner into his own governance of the world. Consequently, the distinction between good and evil, according to the Qur'ānic teachings, must be considered a basic given of the world, having played a decisive role in the further development of God's creation already before humanity lost paradise.¹² In effect, its existence and Satan's activity in paradise are the cause of humanity's

¹⁰ Q 15:32–42.

¹¹ Q 2:36: "Then Satan caused them to slip therefrom [sc., to eat of the forbidden tree] and brought them out of that they were in [sc., paradise]"; Q 20:120: "Then Satan whispered to him saying, 'Adam, shall I point thee to the Tree of Eternity, and a Kingdom that decays not?' So the two of them ate of it." Note that the Qur'ān never mentions the name of Adam's wife who, nevertheless, will be referred to as "Eve" in this paper.

¹² Note God's seemingly self-explanatory warning against evil in Q 2:35: "lest you be evildoers," following Iblīs's fall, but chronologically preceding Adam and Eve's temptation and failure. We must conclude that already at this stage evil is integrated in the basic algorithm of the world's structure and that Adam and Eve have a decent enough understanding of the distinction between good and evil to grasp the meaning of God's warning.

first lapse.¹³ Moreover, as we can conclude from these few indications, evil possesses a function in God's overall plan: in his pact with Iblīs, he accepted it as a litmus test, to distinguish his faithful believers from unbelievers, hypocrites, and the like. Life for human beings, already in paradise, but even more so after banishment from paradise, since its retrieval was now at stake, turns out to be a constant examination, testing their persistent faithfulness to God.¹⁴

Another aspect is noteworthy with regard to quotes 2 and 3. This relates to the hints they give concerning the nature of evil. The introduction of evil into the world consists in Iblīs's refusal to bow to Adam; this is to say, it originates in an act of disobedience toward God, or more precisely, God's command. Moreover, this act is assessed as a feat of haughtiness on the part of Iblīs, who "waxed proud." As a result of his disobedience and pride, Iblīs "became one of the unbelievers," most probably the first one.¹⁵ These indications allow us to conclude that evil as it occurs in the Qur'ān is primarily a moral value, characterizing acts as well as mindsets.¹⁶ In this light, it is particularly striking to notice that doing evil is intricately linked with, first,

13 It is important to mention that the Qur'ān actually uses a causative verbal form (succinctly translated by Arberry as "Satan caused them," cf. above, n. 11, Q 2:36) to express this incident. Note that current research unanimously underscores the absence of the idea of original sin in the Qur'ān and in Islam in general, for instance, Wild, "Der Böse," 53; A. H. Johns, "Fall of Man," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, edited by J. D. McAuliffe (Washington DC: Georgetown University, Brill Online, 2013).

14 Recall, in this connection, al-Jāhiz's reference to "[our] examination," in quote 1.

15 The Qur'ānic formulation as such does not make this point explicitly. See, however, al-Ṭabarī who mentions several traditions according to which there was evil-doing and unbelief already prior to Iblīs's fall, e.g., al-Ṭabarī, *The Story of Iblīs*, 252: "The first to dwell on earth were the jinn. They caused corruption on it and shed blood and killed each other"; 253: "Some jinn disbelieved, and the angels went down to them on earth to fight them. Thus, bloodshed and corruption came into being on earth."

16 This is an important observation in comparison with early Islamic debates, where the take on evil will shift from an emphasis on acts at the expense of the actors' mindsets (Mu'tazila) to downplaying the significance of acts and highlighting the actors' mindsets instead (al-Ghazālī). Moreover, particularly in Mu'tazilite debates, physical evils will attract a lot of attention, i.e., aspects such as pain, harm, mischief, and cognates (for this, see Heemskerck, *Suffering*). While physical evils are not completely absent from the Qur'ān, they are certainly not at the center stage, as our above myth evinces. For our focus on moral evil, see above, n. 3. For a general introduction to the concept of evil in the Qur'ān, see Wheeler, "Good and Evil."

disobeying God; second, pride; and third, becoming an unbeliever. In quote 3, doing evil is furthermore qualified as perversion. Let us underscore, however, that doing evil in the first place is considered an act of disobedience. Meanwhile, categorizing such an act in terms of disobedience presupposes that the evildoer knows about its being forbidden and her thus transgressing a divine command. It is probably for this reason—the evildoer counteracting God’s decrees *despite better knowledge*—that she is labeled as perverse and her act a perversion. Pride, as it is presented here in the Qur’ān, must therefore be understood as a mindset ready to oppose God’s commands knowingly and hence as utterly perverse.¹⁷

Illuminating as these findings may be, they disclose a number of peculiarities which turned out to provide the basis for fierce debates in early Islam. The chief problem entailed by this conception of evil consists in the ambiguity it produced concerning the relation of evil and God’s command. Since evil is identified with disobedience, and disobedience with unbelief, it appears that “evil” and, for that matter, “good” are relative values, depending on God’s previous command. On the other hand, as we just observed, disobedience requires the existence of knowledge about the quality of the intended act. Yet, how could Iblīs have *known* that refusing to obey God is evil? The Qur’ān nowhere mentions that God told his first creatures about the general rule that refusing to carry out his command, under any circumstances, is evildoing. Rather, Scripture seems to assume (and thus, by extension, God seems to do so too) that his creatures already possess this knowledge, as it were, from without, as though it were a “natural” moral principle.¹⁸ It is important to note that there are, throughout the Qur’ān, further passages suited to corroborate the idea that God, on the one hand, created the world in such a way that it contains signs pointing to

17 On the “attitude of haughtiness” as an instance of unbelief (*kufī*), see T. Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’ān* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 142–152.

18 “Natural” in the sense of being inherent in creation and thus “innate” to any rational being.

humanity's "ought"; and, on the other hand, that he equipped human beings with the means to decipher these signs, namely with reason.¹⁹ This notion is often related, by both early Islamic thinkers and current research, to the "covenants" that God established with humankind, one of which we find explicitly mentioned by the Qur'ān, subsequent to Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise.²⁰ There, God promises future guidance to the first human couple, which can be understood as a reference to his intended revelations, i.e., the Torah, the Gospels, and finally the Qur'ān itself, the apex of revelation;²¹ however, it can also be interpreted as referring to the just-mentioned signs already ingrained in creation and accessible to human reason.²²

19 See, in particular, Q 2:164: "Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day and the ship that runs in the sea with profit to men, and the water God sends down from heaven therewith reviving the earth after it is dead and His scattering abroad in it all manner of crawling thing, and the turning about of the winds and the clouds compelled between heaven and earth—surely there are signs for a people having understanding." See, in this connection, G. F. Hourani, "Ethical Presuppositions of the Qur'ān," in *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*, edited by G. F. Hourani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 23–48, 37–45 [originally published in *The Muslim World* 70 (1980):1–28]. While Hourani argues that the Qur'ān in general emphasizes the dependency of humanity on guidance by virtue of revelation (38), he acknowledges that moral judgments independent of Scripture are not completely ruled out (43).

20 On God's covenants with humankind throughout history, see G. Böwering, "Covenant," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, edited by J. D. McAuliffe (Georgetown University, Washington, DC: Brill Online, 2013). Notably, there is the idea of a "primordial covenant," which is understood to embrace humanity in general (i.e., not only Adam and Eve, but also all their descendants, past, present, and future) and hence to be known "innately," committing humankind to belief in and worship of the one God; for this, see particularly Q 7:172: "And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify touching themselves, 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we testify'—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, 'As for us, we were heedless of this;'" cf. C. Schöck, "Adam and Eve," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, edited by J. D. McAuliffe (Georgetown University, Washington, DC: Brill Online, 2013) and Gramlich, "Der Urvertrag in der Koranlegung (zu Sure 1, 172–173)," *Der Islam* 60 (1983):205–230. There are, however, debates in early Islamic theology concerning whether this implies that humanity ultimately can do without revelation. See also below with n. 30.

21 Note that Muḥammad is considered to be the last prophet (the "seal of the prophets," Q 33:40); hence, according to Islamic understanding, with Muḥammad, revelation has come to an end, and all that needed further specification (since expulsion from paradise) has been detailed. The promise of future guidance is Q 2:38: "[God] said, 'Get [you, Adam and Eve] down [to earth] out of it [sc., paradise], all together; yet there shall come to you guidance from Me.'"

22 Cf., in this connection, Ibn Tufayl's (d. 1185) philosophical novel *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, the story of a human being who, by virtue of natural reason alone, discovers the existence of God and the afterlife as well as the duties (way of life) this discovery entails.

Closely connected with this first problem is a second peculiarity of the previously discussed Qur'ānic passages, concerning the kind of obedience expected from Iblīs and the remaining creatures. Thus, if we briefly reconsider Iblīs's rejection to bow to Adam, it turns out that he does so for a reason (see quote 3): "Said [Iblīs], 'I would never bow myself before a mortal whom Thou hast created of a clay of mud moulded.'" As this passage evinces, it is precisely for the unique veneration, owed to God alone, that Iblīs refuses to bow to an inferior creature.²³ Hence, while he obviously knows—wherever *this* knowledge may come from—that he must worship God, he is unaware that this reverence entails unconditional surrender to God's commands, regardless of whether their specific contents are mutually coherent.²⁴ Notably, the severity of Iblīs's misbehavior, meriting qualification as unbelief and perversion and justifying his fall, can only be assessed against the historico-cultural background of the Qur'ānic revelation. Only in view of specific pre-Islamic ethical norms, such as the kind of reverence the members of a tribe owe to their leader, does the rationale of this part of the myth become transparent.²⁵ God is the creator of everything, including Iblīs, and hence the one sovereign to whom

23 Al-Ṭabarī reports of various traditions seeking to explain Iblīs's insubordination toward God; among other things, he recounts (*The Story of Iblīs*, 256): "It is (further) possible that [Iblīs's disobedience] resulted from his being pleased with himself because he worshiped his Lord so zealously" See, in this connection, P. J. Awn, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblīs in Sufi Psychology* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), especially 122–129, discussing fascinating Sufi traditions, one of which (rooted in al-Ḥallāj) considers Iblīs as the perfect monotheist, having refused to bow to any other than God.

24 While the angels and jinn, according to the Qur'ān, are intellectually superior to human beings, they are not omniscient. See, for example, quote 2 where, upon Adam's creation, the angels anticipate corruption and bloodshed committed by humanity. God's reply to this rejection, left out of quote 2, consists in reminding them of their inferior knowledge as compared to himself (Q 2:30): "He said, 'Assuredly I know that you know not.'"

25 For the ethical norms conveyed by the Qur'ān in general, see A. K. Reinhart, "Ethics and the Qur'ān," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, edited by J. D. McAuliffe (Georgetown University, Washington, DC: Brill Online, 2013); with particular emphasis on the Qur'ān's historical and cultural context, A. Neuwirth, "Die Entdeckung des Bösen im Koran. Überlegungen zu den koranischen Versionen des Dekalogs," in *Gut und Böse in Mensch und Welt: Philosophische und religiöse Konzeptionen vom Alten Orient bis zum frühen Islam*, edited by H.-G. Nesselrath and F. Wilk (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 193–209, particularly 196–203; see also Hourani, "Ethical Presuppositions."

everyone and everything owes unreserved devotion, expressed by obedience and faithfulness. By refusing this obligation, Iblīs, according to Arab tribal morals, breaks the most fundamental law underlying all cosmic order, regulating not only the relationship of God and creation but also and *a fortiori* all sorts of relations within the sphere of creation.²⁶

There is, however, a third problem entailed in our above findings. Even if the myth about Iblīs's fall and Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise gives a neat account of the origin and fundamental nature of evil, and granted that the story additionally conveys the idea that human life ever since God's pact with Iblīs must be understood as an examination of humanity's "tribal" persistence and loyalty toward God, of what precisely does this task consist and what means do human beings possess in order to fulfill it? With regard to the conditions in paradise, the Qur'ān gives fairly clear indications. In contrast to the angels and Iblīs, Adam and Eve are vested with God's explicit command:

Quote 4: And [God] said, "Adam, dwell thou, and thy wife in the Garden [i.e., paradise], and eat thereof easefully where you desire; but draw not nigh this tree, lest you be evildoers."²⁷

From this quote we may infer that the evildoing God has in mind here, once again, is not the specific content of the action itself,²⁸ but rather, just like with Iblīs, general disobedience to God's request, in short, as we have seen, lack of reverence. Accordingly, Adam's and Eve's particular duties in paradise consisted of worshipping and obeying God, and resisting the temptations of Satan. By contrast, humanity's situation

²⁶ On the "Islamization of Old Arab Virtues," see particularly Izutsu, *Concepts*, 74–104 (on loyalty in particular, 86–97); on the virtue of "thanking the benefactor" in early Islam, see A. K. Reinhart, *Before Revelation: The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 105–123.

²⁷ Q 2:36, see above n. 12.

²⁸ In this example: eating of a certain tree; in Iblīs's case: bowing to Adam.

after expulsion, but before the Qur'ānic revelation remains unclear: before the advent of the Torah, Gospels, and Qur'ān and the transmission of God's explicit doctrinal and moral instructions, was there any obligation at all or any means to know about it? Scripture itself does not go beyond the few indications discussed above, in connection with the "primordial covenant." As we will see in the second section of this chapter, this ambiguity gave rise to lively debates in early Islam about the existence and cognoscibility of humanity's "ought."²⁹

The Qur'ānic revelation itself, finally, addressed to humanity several centuries after banishment from paradise, imparts a vast array of teachings about evil and humanity's duties.³⁰ While we cannot go into the details here, it is important to note that, in contrast to paradise, the concept of "belief" is specified: whereas the first creatures, including Adam and Eve, were expected to believe in God *tout court*; humanity in the post-revelation era is obliged to hold certain doctrinal tenets, to wit, those teachings God has sent down.³¹ Moreover, human beings are required to exercise whatever Scripture prescribes positively, i.e., beyond their "paradisiac" obligation to worship in general, specific acts like the regular performance of the prayer and paying the alms. On the whole, the general admonitions prevail, thus tending to support the abovementioned position, according to which the Qur'ān

29 There is a wide range of early Islamic legal and theological literature, labeled by current research the "before revelation complex"; for an analysis, see Reinhart, *Before Revelation* (particularly "Part I: Introduction and Overview").

30 See, for example, the following "creed," immediately tailing the myth of Adam's and Eve's expulsion from paradise and God's promise of future guidance (Q 2:39–44): "Children of Israel, remember My blessing wherewith I blessed you, and fulfil My covenant and I shall fulfil your covenant; and have awe of Me. And believe in that I have sent down, confirming that which is with you, and be not the first to disbelieve in it. And sell not My signs for a little price; and fear you Me. And do not confound the truth with vanity, and do not conceal the truth wittingly. And perform the prayer, and pay the alms, and bow with those that bow. Will you bid other to piety, and forget yourselves while you recite the Book?" Note the reference to the "covenant," often understood as an allusion to the abovementioned "primordial covenant." The question remains whether "guidance" means "signs" in general (e.g., in creation) or "revelation" in particular. For an analysis of another type of Qur'ānic teachings, the decalogs, see Neuwirth, "Die Entdeckung des Bösen," particularly 195–206.

31 For example, belief in the day of judgment and bodily resurrection.

addresses its readers (or listeners) on the assumption that they possess a rudimentary knowledge of good and evil and are able to produce moral judgments without explicit divine instruction. For instance, the Qurʾān regularly calls upon its recipients to substitute good for bad works, promising reward (paradise), and threatening with punishment (hell), but without any further explanation of what it means by “good” and “bad works.”³² It remains unclear, however, where the Qurʾān’s recipients would have acquired this basic understanding of “good” and “evil”: from previous revelations (Torah, Gospels) or “naturally,” through the “primordial covenant”?

2. REWARD AND PUNISHMENT: EVIL AND EARLY ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Quote 5: The Muʿtazila hold that acts are divided into good (*ḥasana*) and evil (*qabiḥa*). Some acts are such that they may be perceived immediately by reason (*ʿaql*), such as the goodness of rescuing drowning persons or persons perishing; and . . . thanking the benefactor; . . . or as . . . the evilness of ingratitude; . . . and of a purposeless falsehood.³³

With this summary by al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) of his adversaries’ the Muʿtazila’s, position, we move a significant step “forward” in history, from the revelation of the Qurʾān to the period in which Sunni orthodoxy took its first shape, the eleventh/twelfth century. “Good” and “evil” have meanwhile developed into key juridical terms; however, they are based on specific ontological and epistemological assumptions, reflecting the teachings of the different theological schools. In this section

32 See, for instance, Q 27:11: “surely the Envoys do not fear in My presence, save him who has done evil, then, after evil, has changed into good; All-forgiving am I, All-compassionate”; see also Reinhart, “Ethics and the Qurʾān.”

33 Al-Ghazālī, *Mustaṣfā*, 88 (paragraph 5); throughout this study, Reinhart’s translation of the *Mustaṣfā* is slightly adjusted to the terminology employed here.

of the chapter, we will focus on a passage from al-Ghazālī's *Mustasfā*, his masterpiece on the principles of religious law. Among these principles are good and evil, which is why a significant part of the treatise is dedicated to their discussion. In this part, al-Ghazālī proceeds in a fashion which is highly revealing for our purposes in that his first move is to introduce and criticize his opponents' view: the Mu'tazila's position on good and evil; it is against this background that he expands the notion which, according to him, must be defended as the only one in agreement with Scripture. Notably, as we will see, his arguments are not based on references to authority but consistently on strictly logical reasons. Moreover, as we will see, he moves from an ontological foundation of values as defended by the Mu'tazila to an epistemological perspective grounded in the knowledge allegedly handed down by God through revelation. Hence, we shall, first, look into the Mu'tazila's concept of good and evil as presented by al-Ghazālī; second, into al-Ghazālī's criticism and rejection of their model; and finally, as a conclusion to this chapter, into his own notion of moral values.

(i) *Al-Ghazālī's Mu'tazila*. As al-Ghazālī's account in quote 5 evinces, the Mu'tazilites apply the terms "good" and "evil" unequivocally to acts: according to this notion, acts are either good or bad.³⁴ The grounds on which they defend this position become clearer a little

34 It should be noted that "evil" (*qabīḥ*), according to Mu'tazilite teaching, is a fairly broad umbrella term signifying not only moral evil but also physical evil (harmful things, such as pain). Given the topic of this paper, we will focus on moral evil, even though the attention the Mu'tazilites directed toward physical evil clearly overshadows their interest in moral evil. For a comprehensive account on physical evil in Mu'tazilite thought, see Heemskerk, *Suffering* (mentioned above in n. 16). Note that there are also morally neutral acts which, however, are of no particular interest for our analysis either and, hence, will not be examined specifically. For an analysis of Mu'tazilite ethics, see D. Gimaret, "Un problème de théologie musulmane: Dieu veut-il les actes mauvais? Thèses et arguments," *Studia Islamica* 40 (1974):5–73 (see the sections dedicated to Mu'tazilite authors and arguments); S. Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Mu'tazilite Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), particularly chapters 1–3; on the Mu'tazila's most prominent representative, 'Abd al-Jabbār (eleventh century), see G. F. Hourani, "The Rationalist Ethics of 'Abd al-Jabbār," in *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*, edited by G. F. Hourani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 98–108 [originally published in *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition: Essays Presented by His Friends and Pupils to Richard Walzer on His Seventieth Birthday*, edited by S. M. Stern, G. F. Hourani, and V. Brown (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), 105–115].

later in the text where al-Ghazālī has the Mu‘tazila, in the form of a fictitious dialogue, maintain:

Quote 6: [W]e claim that goodness or evilness is a predicate of essence for the good and the evil that [human] reason (*‘aql*) immediately perceives in some things, such as oppression (*ẓulm*), falsehood, ingratitude, and uncouth ignorance.³⁵

Two peculiarities in this quote merit our attention: the description of goodness and evilness as a “predicate of essence” and that good and evil are localized “in . . . things.” For from this we can infer that, ontologically speaking, acts, such as oppression and falsehood, rescuing a drowning person, and thanking the benefactor, are *things*, i.e., they are among the entities that exist in the world. Moreover, good and evil are properties of these acts, which is to say that just like the color of an apple or the size of a shoe, good and evil do occur as attributes of things. Given that they are explained as *essential* predicates, we can further conclude that every kind of act *by its very nature* possesses one of the two characteristics (see quote 5).³⁶ Finally, quotes 5 and 6 reveal an intriguing epistemological feature of the Mu‘tazila’s position, connected to their ontology. They are convinced that good and bad belong to a class of attributes that are immediately perceived by reason. The Arabic term translated here as “immediately” (*ḍarūrī*) can also be rendered as “necessarily” and conveys the idea that any given human being, without previous studies and protracted reasoning, cannot help but grasp these properties. They are, as it were, self-evident.

These are fairly strong claims calling for further exploration. Returning, first, to the Mu‘tazila’s ontological presuppositions, as summarized by al-Ghazālī, it is noteworthy that good and evil are

³⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Mustasfā*, 90 (paragraph 22).

³⁶ In this connection, see above, quote 1, where al-Jāḥiẓ too intimates that good and evil somehow constitute reality.

objective attributes, i.e., they inhere in the respective acts independent of any circumstances, such as time, place, intention of the agent, or purpose and outcome of the act. This is to say that acts like those enumerated in quotes 5 and 6 are *always* either good or evil. On this account, falsehoods, such as telling a lie, for instance, are always bad things. With his typical polemic verve, al-Ghazālī zooms in on this aspect, which, in his view, is absurd:

Quote 7: How could [falsehood's] evilness be essential . . . if it were [employed] to preserve the blood of a prophet by concealing his location from a tyrant whose aim was to kill [the prophet]?³⁷

To al-Ghazālī it is clear that telling the tyrant the truth about the prophet's whereabouts amounts to disobeying God and hence to unbelief in the sense discussed in the first section of this chapter, with the example of Iblīs. Therefore, the Mu'tazilā's ontology of good and evil must be rejected, in al-Ghazālī's view, as it leads to the exact opposite assessment.

Before we further investigate this point, it should be mentioned that al-Ghazālī's depiction of the Mu'tazilite position is—as is often the case with his polemics—a little unfair. The doctrine he presents as his target was by his time no longer prevalent. While it is true that, as per the available sources,³⁸ early Mu'tazilites did defend such a rudimentary ontology of acts, in the course of internal school debates, they had come across the often quite unpleasant consequences of this position, as encapsulated in the example of the persecuted prophet. Accordingly, they had developed a theory of what might be called second-order

37 Al-Ghazālī, *Mustasfā*, 90 (paragraph 25).

38 The situation with regard to the surviving sources of the ninth and tenth centuries is complicated: only a few original Mu'tazilite texts (or fragments) are extant; most of what we know about this school is contained in later heresiographies (e.g., al-Ash'arī's *Maqālāt*, which is to say, a survey by the founder of the Ash'ariyya, the Mu'tazilā's opponents). The first substantial and truly Mu'tazilite oeuvre available today is 'Abd al-Jabbār's *Mughnī*, written in the eleventh century.

qualities (literally: aspects, Arabic: *wajh*, plural *wujūh*).³⁹ In contrast to truly essential (or first-order) qualities, such as the color of the apple and the size of the shoe, *wujūh* depend on further circumstances. Thus, in the case of our first example, the apple possesses the second-order quality of healthiness—provided it is eaten. Moral values like good and evil, with only a limited number of exceptions of *essentially* good or evil things,⁴⁰ are considered to be such *wujūh*, on this advanced account, to the effect that now one and the same act can embrace several, even contradictory values. Applied to the just-mentioned example, while eating the apple may provide the eater with healthy (and hence good) vitamins, she may suffer from a specific allergy and thus encounter certain harmful (and hence bad) reactions to the apple. Therefore, in order to assess the overall value of eating the apple, a Muʿtazilite must set up a calculus, somewhat reminiscent of the cost-benefit calculation of modern utilitarianism.⁴¹

Regarding the Muʿtazilā's concept of evil, their ontological stance has some remarkable implications. Even according to their advanced doctrine (operating with *wujūh*), evil does exist, albeit usually as a second-order attribute of acts and only exceptionally as an essential property; this is to say, moral values possess an objective ground in extramental

39 It should be noted that the terminology of first- and second-order qualities employed in this paper cannot be confused with the similar modern terminology (e.g., John Locke). According to Muʿtazilite ontology, first-order attributes are properties such as qualities (color) and quantities (size) which are attached to things under any circumstances and hence are essential. Second-order qualities, by contrast, occur only under certain circumstances, such as the taste of an apple, which, according to the Muʿtazilites, crops up only if the apple is eaten and, therefore, is not an essential property. For the Muʿtazilite (or, in general, early theological) ontology, see R. M. Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes: The Teachings of the Basrian School of the Muʿtazila in the Classical Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), particularly 58–92 (on essential attributes). For a concise summary of the advanced Muʿtazilite theory (based on *wujūh*), see Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, 147–151.

40 Thus, even according to the advanced theory, there are some acts which are evil always, first and foremost, unbelief (toward God) and ingratitude. For this see, for instance, Abū Rashīd, *Masāʾil*, in Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, 143: “Some of the more recent among [the Muʿtazilite school of al-Kaʿbī] hold, concerning something evil, that there is that which is evil in itself (*li-nafsihi*) and there is that which is evil because of [second-order] evilness (*qubh*).”

41 For a succinct analysis of the developments within the Muʿtazilite school of these issues, see Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, 138–151.

reality. In light of the Qur'ānic teachings we discussed above, it thus turns out that the Mu'tazilites endorse one of the two competing interpretations of moral values as discussed in revelation: they lean toward the "objective" or "natural" side. According to them, the goodness or evilness of certain acts is a quasi-natural given, provided certain (likewise "objective") circumstances apply; that is, goodness or evilness is one of the features of acts as an effect of God having created them in this way. This is particularly striking in the case of those few acts which, even according to the advanced Mu'tazilite theory, are good or evil always, i.e., essentially, for instance, unbelief and ingratitude. For, on the Mu'tazila's account, these acts possess an intrinsic value and, therefore, are good or evil independent of (or prior to) the Qur'ānic (or any other) revelation by God—they were created in this fashion.⁴² Al-Ghazālī too noticed this allegation and highlighted it in his summary:

Quote 8: Furthermore, [the Mu'tazila] regard [the acts mentioned in quote 6] as forbidden to any sane person [even] before the coming of revelation (*shar'*), because [these acts] are evil in themselves.⁴³

On this view, any human being of sound mind, be they Muslims or not, can distinguish good from evil, because these acts "are evil in themselves." While this doctrine recalls those passages in the Qur'ān where this latter alludes to the "primordial covenant," it entails, among other things, and with respect to the significance of the Qur'ān as an instrument of salvation, that humanity can discover at least a significant portion of its moral obligation on its own, "before the coming of revelation." This aspect is reinforced by the Mu'tazila's corresponding

42. Consequently, with regard to the problem we briefly broached above (in the first section of this paper), i.e., the question of whether there was any moral obligation in the era between expulsion from paradise and revelation, the Mu'tazila would insist that, indeed, there was the same basic morality in act as ever; moreover, it was accessible to humanity in general, just as it is to gentiles still nowadays (at least in its essentials).

43. Al-Ghazālī, *Mustasfā*, 90 (paragraph 22; substituting "sane person" for "*compos mentis*" here and throughout).

epistemological claim, according to which human reason (*‘aql*) by necessity (*darūri*) perceives the value of certain acts (quotes 5 and 6). Accordingly, the Qur’ānic or any other previous revelation merely confirms what a fully developed human being by means of reason alone will understand, and additionally supplements a number of nonessential specifics,⁴⁴ concerning chiefly Islam’s particular rites and practices, like regular prayer and giving alms.⁴⁵

At this point, some final remarks concerning the Mu‘tazila’s understanding of “evil” are in order. For one, the semantic reduction of “evil” to “not-or less beneficial” in the advanced theory is noteworthy. The background of this position can be traced to the Mu‘tazilite ontology (both the early and the advanced) and the question of how people without already having received revelation can nevertheless know which acts are good and which are not. In view of humanity’s task to regain paradise, this is the most urgent problem for every individual to solve. According to the advanced Mu‘tazila, the acts themselves contain more or less immediate indications: either they belong to those acts which are essentially good or evil in a way that it is evident for any sane person (quote 5); or they do not, in which case their presumed outcomes must be assessed. If upon careful consideration of all the relevant aspects (*wujūh*) they are most likely to be beneficial, they can be

44 “Nonessential” in the sense of the Mu‘tazilite ontology, i.e., as second-order properties, occurring only under certain circumstances.

45 Accordingly, the Qur’ān gives guidance with regard to acts whose value cannot be derived from universal rules (e.g., ingratitude is an evil; this is an instance of ingratitude; therefore it is evil). Hence, revelation specifies circumstantial aspects (*wujūh*), allowing for the establishment of a “moral calculus” and determination of the overall value of a concrete act. Thus, for example, drinking or eating as such are not evil (essentially); through revelation, however, humankind learns that drinking *wine* and eating *pork* are evil—the circumstances in these cases being the specific beverage and food. In this connection, it may be worthwhile to draw attention to the implications of the Mu‘tazilite ontology of good and evil with regard to their notion of God and his relationship with creation, cf. R. M. Frank, “Can God Do What Is Wrong?,” in *Classical Islamic Theology: The Ash‘arites*, vol. 3 of *Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalām*. Variorum Collected Studies Series, 835, edited by D. Gutas, IV (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) [originally published in *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy*, edited by T. Rudavsky (Boston: D. Reidel, 1985), 69–79]; and Gimaret, “Un problème” (who also examines the Ash‘arite position on this issue, in dispute with the Mu‘tazila).

judged “good,” if harmful, by contrast, “evil.” In effect, the yardstick applied in this calculus is the expected benefit (or harm) of an act, i.e., its anticipated positive or negative contribution to obtaining salvation. It is this feature which gives Mu‘tazilite ethics a distinctly consequentialist trait.⁴⁶

Finally, as we have seen above, even after revelation, the workings of this basic moral calculus do not change, on the Mu‘tazila’s account. Revelation and creation do not contradict each other, rather, revelation confirms by virtue of explicit commands and prohibitions what human reason previously had to figure out on its own. In addition, revelation may attach values to acts which formerly reason would have assessed as morally neutral, for example, the drinking of wine or the eating of pork.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, despite the “objective” existence of good and evil as first-order or second-order attributes of “real” things, it is important to note that, according to the Mu‘tazilite understanding, there cannot be anything like absolute evil. As the Mu‘tazila insist, good and evil are and remain attributes. Consequently, they are, first, from God’s perspective, signs tailored to guide humanity; and second, from humanity’s perspective, they can be used as indications meant to evaluate the *efficacy* of acts in relation to their ultimate end: the attainment of God’s reward and the avoidance of his punishment in the afterlife.⁴⁸ Therefore, in its eschatological dimension, “moral obligation” translates into “prudence with regard to the economy of salvation.”

(ii) *Al-Ghazālī Against the Mu‘tazila*. With this background, let us return to al-Ghazālī and examine his critical engagement with the

46 See, for example, Hourani, “The Rationalist Ethics of ‘Abd al-Jabbār”; see also Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, particularly 151–160.

47 See above, n. 45; accordingly, it is the aspect (*wajh*) which is re-assessed by revelation (here: the value of certain objects of consumption, i.e., wine and pork), not the act as such (here: drinking, eating).

48 As a consequence, from a Mu‘tazilite perspective any moral judgment is ultimately based on objective facts in extramental reality. Hence, provided someone who assesses an act is of sound mind and carries through her moral calculus correctly (i.e., with respect to the relevant aspects and their individual “weights”), there is an exact correspondence between her evaluation (as “good” or “bad”) and the actual second-order attribute (good or bad) of the act under consideration.

Muʿtazilites in more detail. As we will see, there are three chief targets of his criticism: the Muʿtazilite ontology, their epistemology, and their consequentialism.⁴⁹ He enters the debate by rehearsing what he considers to be the Muʿtazila's principal contentions:

Quote 9: In what you have mentioned, you are alleging three matters: [one,] that evilness is an essential predicate; [two,] that it is something sane persons know necessarily; [and three,] your supposition that if sane persons agree upon it, this [agreement constitutes] decisive proof and is an indication (*dalīl*) of its being necessary (*ḍarūrī*) [knowledge].⁵⁰

With the first item of this list, al-Ghazālī zooms in on the Muʿtazila's claim that good and evil are attributes of things. He ignores the sophisticated distinction between essential and second-order properties of the advanced Muʿtazilite theory and only mentions essential predicates; yet, his target is anyway the alleged ontological status of moral values rather than their precise connection with things. In his view, it is inconceivable that good and evil exist in extramental reality just like qualities such as colors or sizes do. To the contrary, moral values are *relational predicates*,⁵¹ which is to say, they are judgments based on a specific measure applied by the one who judges. Al-Ghazālī supports his theory of the relativity of moral values by quoting the abovementioned example of the prophet, dogged by the tyrant in

49 In his criticism of the Muʿtazila (particularly, their ontology and epistemology), al-Ghazālī is strongly inspired by his teacher, al-Juwaynī, see G. F. Hourani, "Juwaynī's Criticisms of Muʿtazilite Ethics," in *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*, edited by G. F. Hourani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 124–134 [originally published in *The Muslim World* 65 (1975): 161–173].

50 Al-Ghazālī, *Mustasfā*, 90 (paragraph 23).

51 See, for example, al-Ghazālī, *Mustasfā*, 89 (paragraph 17): "[Good and evil] are relational [predicates], not objective [predicates] like blackness or whiteness, it being inconceivable that a given thing [e.g., the Kaʿba] be black as far as Zayd is concerned and white as far as ʿAmr is concerned," implying, as it were, that the opposite is true for good and evil, i.e., that something good for Zayd can be bad for ʿAmr.

order to be executed (quote 7): if falsehood were bad absolutely as the Mu‘tazila maintain (quotes 5 and 6), safeguarding the prophet’s life by means of a white lie could never be assessed as good. Therefore, the Qur’ānic teachings, according to which protecting the prophet’s life irrespective of the means is the right thing to do, unambiguously proves that moral values *cannot* be linked to ontological givens.⁵² In contrast to the metaphysical makeup of reality, moral values fluctuate.⁵³

From his argumentation so far it is clear that al-Ghazālī endeavors to reduce to absurdity the interpretation of moral values as objective entities attached to things (acts) in extramental reality. Meanwhile, even though the example of the prophet is intuitively highly convincing in this sense, it does not cover cases in which assessment appears to be generally shared by humankind, such as the prohibition to kill another. This, however, leads us to the third item on the list in quote 9, the Mu‘tazilite assumption that general agreement can serve as proof. For, as al-Ghazālī has well spotted, the weakness of the Mu‘tazilā’s argument for the objectivity of moral values consists in their epistemological premises. Ultimately, their theory hinges on the supposition that universal agreement proves something about extramental reality. In order to refute this claim, al-Ghazālī proceeds in two steps: first, he attacks the connection established by the Mu‘tazilites between consensus and *ḍarūri* knowledge:

52 There are numerous passages in the Qur’ān imparting the idea that any believer is expected to support prophets who, after all, were sent by God to transmit his messages; a striking example of this, which may be at the back of al-Ghazālī’s allusion, is Q 28:20–21: “Then came a man from the furthest part of the city, running; he said, ‘Moses, the Council are conspiring to slay thee. Depart; I am one of thy sincere advisers.’ So he departed therefrom”; see also, with this background, Q 26:52–68 (Israel’s exodus), describing God himself as protecting Moses and his believers from Pharaoh.

53 Cf., on this issue, al-Ghazālī’s highly polemical mockery, *Mustasfā*, 91 (paragraph 26): “How could an essential attribute be exchanged (for its opposite) through the connection (of the act) to variant circumstances?” He thus raises the question of how something, considered to be intrinsically bad like falsehood, all of a sudden can turn into a good thing, given that only the circumstances (the situation) changed, but not the thing (falsehood) as such. Accordingly, even the Mu‘tazilites subscribing to the *wajh* theory are (partially) wrong, since they still hold that there are at least some acts which are *intrinsically* good (or bad); see above, with n. 40.

Quote 10: The immediate (*ḍarūrī*) perception [that something is good or evil]: how is this possible when we dispute with you about it? The immediately [perceived] is by definition that about which there is no dispute by a large group of sane persons.⁵⁴

Accordingly, the simple fact that al-Ghazālī, presumably a sane person, disagrees with his adversaries disproves the presence of general agreement; hence, the conclusions of, first, a *ḍarūrī* knowledge and, second, the objective existence of moral values as the foundation of this knowledge turn out to be invalid.

Second, al-Ghazālī questions the argumentative power of consensus in general, and this is, I believe, where his genuine concern comes to the fore. There are two chief epistemological problems al-Ghazālī has in mind here: agreement, even if it were universal, does not tell anything about (*a*) its origin and (*b*) the nature of what is agreed upon. Thus, al-Ghazālī intimates:

Quote 11: People have agreed on the proof (*ithbāt*) of [the existence of] the Creator and the possibility of sending [prophets], so that no one disagrees . . . But even if these persons agreed to support [these arguments, knowledge of the existence of the Creator and his sending of messengers] would [still] not be immediate (*ḍarūrī*).⁵⁵

What al-Ghazālī has in mind in this quote are the numerous proofs of the existence of God and the possibility of prophecy, with the first kind of proofs in vogue already in antiquity and extremely popular in early Islamic thought as well.⁵⁶ However, as this example plainly exhibits, even though among his contemporaries there was general consent *that*

⁵⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Mustaṣfā*, 91 (paragraph 27).

⁵⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Mustaṣfā*, 90 (paragraph 23).

⁵⁶ See particularly H. A. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

God exists and prophecy is possible, the origin of this shared knowledge is proof and not self-evidence.⁵⁷ Therefore, even though it may be *certain* knowledge (*yaqīnī*), provided the proofs are valid, it nevertheless is not *immediate* (*darūrī*). Moreover, while in this case the origin of the shared knowledge is unambiguous (namely, proofs), in other instances this may not apply. Thus, someone may be convinced that falsehood is evil absolutely and consider this a self-evident principle, as corroborated by the fact that across cultures it is generally accepted, then this still would not prove the Mu‘tazila’s claim that tenets such as this one can be described as “immediate” knowledge. They can as well be the result of upbringing, religious commitment, or personal preferences, even unbeknownst to the individual.⁵⁸

This brings us back to the relativity of good and evil, already broached in quote 9, and to al-Ghazālī’s rejection of Mu‘tazilite consequentialism. Primarily by means of his criticism of their epistemology, al-Ghazālī has shown that his opponents’ theory of good and evil is based on a fundamental mistake: it is logically impossible to argue from however broad an agreement of sane persons to the immediacy of knowledge and, through this immediacy, to an actual and *necessary* state of affairs. Therefore, the only thing we know about moral values is that they are judgments by individual human beings. If we take the Mu‘tazila’s teaching seriously, meanwhile, the reference points for these judgments are not things (in extramental reality) and their qualities, as they themselves maintain, but rather concurrence with each individual’s own objectives or contrariness to them.

57 According to Muslim philosophers, God’s existence must be proven and cannot be presupposed as though self-evident; see, for example, Avicenna, *Metaphysics* I, 1, (11):3–4.

58 See, for example, al-Ghazālī, *Mustaṣfā*, 91 (paragraph 32): “Thus, the fact that the agreement is patched together from these various causes does not establish that it is necessary [knowledge].” Ibid., 92 (paragraph 36): “We do not deny the widespread [affirmation] of these judgments among human-kind and that they are generally thought praise-worthy. Yet the basis [of these judgments] is either [a] religious commitment to revelational stipulations or [b] [conformity of the act to one’s] objectives.” Ibid. 93 (paragraph 42): “Yet, [under certain circumstances] he would find in his soul the antipathy to [falsehood that was there] because of an entire upbringing in disapproval [of falsehood]. For it has been put to him since his youth, in the course of training and guidance.”

For were someone to assess an act without knowing of the Qur'ānic teachings ("before the coming of revelation," quote 8), i.e., based on natural reason alone, how would she proceed? The only basis available for judgment is, as al-Ghazālī has just shown, her own "moral sense," which is to say, an arbiter "patched together from . . . various causes,"⁵⁹ such as personal preferences, expected benefits, or apprehended harms. Thus, the Mu'tazilite moral calculus, desperately struggling for ultimate deliverance, in al-Ghazālī's presentation morphs into an utterly subjective kind of egoism and, at the same time, a hopeless relativism.⁶⁰

According to al-Ghazālī, we can now summarize the critique of the Mu'tazila: there is neither, *ontologically* speaking, an "objective" landscape of good and evil structuring extramental reality; nor, *epistemologically* speaking, an infallible "cognitive" compass, connected to extramental reality and providing humanity with an immediate bearing of moral values. On serious epistemological grounds, al-Ghazālī is confident in having refuted, along with the Mu'tazila's position, the much more general idea that there can be morality and, hence, moral values independent of divine revelation; and, even worse, that human beings on their own, by virtue of unaided reason, would even be able to know about this.⁶¹ On al-Ghazālī's account, therefore, human beings cannot know of a "primordial covenant," without being taught so by Scripture. All that they can know about morality is what God has revealed to them. As a consequence, acts possess moral value *if and only*

⁵⁹ This quote refers to al-Ghazālī, *Mustafā*, 91 (paragraph 32).

⁶⁰ See, for instance, al-Ghazālī, *Mustafā*, 89 (paragraph 14): "Thus, were a great king killed, [that killing] would be good with respect to his enemies, and evil with respect to his protégés." Ibid. 93 (paragraph 39): "Humans apply the word 'evil' to what is contrary to their objectives, even though it may accord with the interests of another, due to the fact that they do not take others into consideration. Every nature is enamored of itself and disdains the other. Thus it determines evilness unrestrictedly." Admittedly, this final assessment of the Mu'tazila's consequentialism displays a particularly negative anthropology on the part of al-Ghazālī, which is certainly not shared by the Mu'tazilites themselves.

⁶¹ I.e., even if there were such an "objective" morality, one simply could not know about it for the previously discussed reasons. It is impossible for human beings to find out whether prior to their social, religious, etc., conditioning they already held some inborn moral principles and propositions as

if they are at least implicitly assessed by the Qurʾān.⁶² Moreover, their values could be exactly contrary to what they actually are, had God so chosen.⁶³ Hence, concerning humanity's chief task as indicated in the Qurʾān, i.e., (re-)admittance to paradise, this cannot be accomplished by a gentile who has never heard of revelation—except, that is, if God in his incomprehensible benevolence and omnipotence decides otherwise.⁶⁴ Belief in God and obedience to him in the era after the loss of paradise, as understood by al-Ghazālī, have taken on a remarkable shade: they mean precisely and unconditionally submission to and accordance with the divinely revealed doctrines and commands. Moral obligation, hence, results exclusively from the fact that God gave commands and nothing else.

(iii) *Conclusion: Al-Ghazālī's Concept of Evil.* From his fictitious debate with the Muʿtazila, it is obvious that al-Ghazālī's understanding of evil is based on a significantly different reading of the Qurʾān. Just as Iblīs's peculiar evil consisted in disobedience to God and opposition to his command, evil in general, according to al-Ghazālī, resides in insubordination and recalcitrance. Therefore, morality in the post-expulsion age necessarily presupposes divine instruction; without God explicitly

an anthropological given. On al-Ghazālī's epistemological skepticism, see the remarkable example he gives himself in *The Incoherence*, 17, here 174, paragraph (13): "I do not know what is at the house at present. All I know is that I have left a book in the house, which is perhaps now a horse that has defiled the library with its urine and its dung"; this example is meant to underscore that we can only know the existence of what we call an effect "with" what we dub its cause, but not its existence "by" this presumed cause. For an analysis of this 17th discussion, see Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* 147–173.

62. This is referring to the practice in legal reasoning which is based on the rules conveyed explicitly by the Qurʾān. Further regulations, concerning matters not directly addressed in Scripture, must be deduced from these explicit indications. For a succinct introduction to Islamic law, see for instance W. B. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

63. See, for example, al-Ghazālī, *Mustafā*, 98 (paragraph 63): "Indeed, if one opens the door of fancies, it may occur to her that God will *punish* her if she thanks Him"; Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, 163 with n. 9, identifies as the "locus classicus" of this position al-Ashʿarī, the founder of the Ashʿariyya, who in his *Lumaʿ* (sec. 170) proclaims: "If [God] had esteemed [a falsehood] good, it would be good, and if He ordered [us] to it, there would be no gainsaying Him" (Reinhart's translation).

64. It should be mentioned that al-Ghazālī's epistemological skepticism comes along with an extreme emphasis on God's transcendence. Whatever God is and does, therefore, on al-Ghazālī's account, is categorically beyond human intellectual capacities. See the last section below.

allowing, prohibiting, or commanding acts, human beings have no means whatsoever to find out about their duties. As a matter of fact, they cannot even know whether there is something like moral obligation. Evil, on this account, does not *exist* at all, it is only and exclusively a *designation* God attached to some acts when he addressed humanity in his revelations. Consequently, there is no point in inquiring into acts, their attributes, and circumstances, as such; there cannot, in short, be anything like ethics understood as an “objective science.” Rather, ethics must be conceived as hermeneutics, since it is only by virtue of scriptural exegesis that humanity can find out about the moral values (or rather “labels”) of acts. Notably, al-Ghazālī’s nominalistic take on moral values turns the Mu’talilite ontology upside-down: while his opponents maintain that there are kinds of acts which, in and of themselves, *are* good or bad and, therefore, ought to be done or shunned, al-Ghazālī insists that there are certain acts which, by dint of God’s command, are prescribed or forbidden, and this is what we *call* good or bad. Accordingly, his position can be described, in comparison to the Mu’tazila, as a shift from a “realistic” and “consequentialist” view of evil to a “nominalistic” and “agnostic” stance—“agnostic” instead of “consequentialist,” since al-Ghazālī even rejects the dependability on the recompense of one’s acts. Even though the Qur’ān itself promises reward and punishment in the afterlife, God’s transcendence removes him from any speculation about his final assessment of each individual’s life-long faith-and-loyalty test.⁶⁵

As a matter of fact, al-Ghazālī’s insistence on God’s transcendence and intangibility by virtue of human reason has a remarkable counterpart. It is supplemented, as it were, by an internalization of morality and accountability. While according to al-Ghazālī it is true that human beings cannot know God’s plans, by means of revelation they do, according to him, possess God’s explicit commands and proscriptions.

65 Which is the reason why, as insinuated above, even gentiles may be admitted to paradise—if God so decides.

Therefore, the only thing they do know (this, however, with certitude) is their obligation to believe in God and adhere to his orders. Even though they will often not succeed in performing their duties,⁶⁶ what actually comes to count, on al-Ghazālī's theory, are their *intentions*. As a consequence, good and bad are no longer attributes of (purposeful) acts; they are, strictly speaking, not even "labels" of what God commanded and forbade; they are, instead, properties of the *mindsets* of human beings who have no means to know whether an intended act is conducive to attaining their ultimate goal (salvation); human beings who, nevertheless, sincerely *endeavor* to accord with the only thing they know for certain: God's commands. In addition to thus siding with the "command" interpretation of Qur'ānic morality, al-Ghazālī moreover returns, beyond the Mu'tazila, to the second core aspect of the Qur'ānic concept of evil: evil as a moral value, characterizing mindsets (see Iblīs's pride and perversion) and, hence, human beings and their moral wills, rather than acts and their expediency.

66 This is due primarily to al-Ghazālī's theory of agency: on this account, whatever happens occurs by virtue of God alone, the sole true agent. Human beings can only "acquire" their acts by willing them, in which case they are responsible for them, regardless of whether God realized the intended acts. On this Ash'arite doctrine, see R. M. Frank, "Moral Obligation in Classical Muslim Theology," in *Classical Islamic Theology: The Ash'arites*, vol. 3 of *Texts and Studies on the Development and History of Kalām*. Variorum Collected Studies Series, 835, edited by D. Gutas (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) [originally published in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 11 (1983): 204–223], particularly 210–215 (on the "agency of human actions"). On al-Ghazālī's ethics of actions, see G. F. Hourani, "Ghazālī on the Ethics of Action," in *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*, edited by G. F. Hourani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 135–166 [originally published in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96 (1976): 69–88].